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ABSTRACT

This document consists of seven policy issue papers developed by the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council, an action-oriented coalition of statewide organizations concerned with early childhood education. Members include teachers, school administrators, children's librarians, child care providers, Head Start directors, State Department of Education early childhood consultants, and teacher educators. Definitions of several key terms and concepts are provided, including: developmental appropriateness, screening process, developmental screening tests, readiness tests, achievement tests, diagnostic tests, intelligence tests, readiness, transition, delayed entry, retention, and extra-year program. The seven issue papers discuss: (1) readiness; (2) transition; (3) kindergarten entrance procedures; (4) developmental screening; (5) achievement testing; (6) retention; and (7) extra year programs. Included in each paper are discussions of current educational practices related to the issue, answers to questions to consider about the issue, recommendations for policy changes, strategies for bringing about change, and a list of sources. A total of 71 sources are provided. (LPP)

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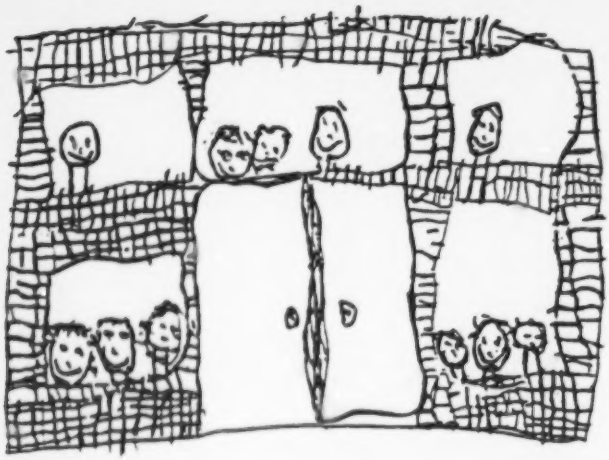

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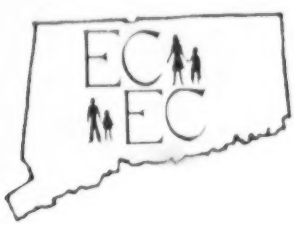
COMING TO SCHOOL IN CONNECTICUT: ACCEPTING CHILDREN AS THEY ARE

Issue Papers Developed By The Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council



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October, 1990: Revised May, 1996

The Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council is an action oriented coalition of statewide organizations concerned with early childhood education, including teachers, school administrators, children's librarians, child care providers, Head Start directors, State Department of Education early childhood consultants, and teacher educators. The CECEC has developed the enclosed issue papers in order to further the discussion about readiness, transition, kindergarten entry age and procedures, developmental screening, achievement testing, retention, and extra year programs. We have provided these issue papers for your consideration.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

These issue papers were developed by a committee of the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council in response to the need to clarify practices pertaining to school entry, assessment procedures and retention. The committee wrote these papers based on sound developmental theory and practice in response to controversies surrounding these areas.

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Connecticut Association of Independent Schools (CAIS)
Connecticut Association of Schools (Elementary Board of Control) (CAS)
Connecticut Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (CASCD)
Connecticut Council of Child Care Coordinators in Community - Technical Colleges (7Cs)
Connecticut Division of Early Childhood (Council of Exceptional Children)
Connecticut Family Day Care Associations Network (CFDCAN)
Connecticut Head Start Association
Connecticut Library Association (Children's Section) (CLA)
Connecticut School Age Child Care Alliance (CSACCA)
Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE)
Early Childhood Educators in Four Year Institutions of Higher Education
Early Childhood Network (ECN)
Elementary and Middle School Principals' Association of Connecticut (EMSPAC)
Kindergarten Association of Connecticut (KAC)
Montessori Schools of Connecticut
Teacher Center Network

The Drawing on the cover was done by Daniel Granucci, age five.

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DEFINITIONS

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATENESS

The concept of developmental appropriateness has two dimensions: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness.

1. *AGE APPROPRIATENESS.* Human development research indicates that there are universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children during the first 9 years of life. These predictable changes occur in all domains of development--physical, emotional, social, and cognitive. Knowledge of typical development of children within the age span served by the program, provides a framework from which teachers prepare the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences (Bredekamp, 1987).

2. *INDIVIDUAL APPROPRIATENESS.* Each child is a unique person with an individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as individual personality, learning style, and family background. Both the curriculum and adults' interactions with children should be responsive to individual differences. Learning in young children is the result of interaction between the child's thoughts and experiences with materials, ideas, and people. These experiences should match the child's developing abilities, while also challenging the child's interest and understanding.

   Teachers can use child development knowledge to identify the range of appropriate behaviors, activities, and materials for a specific age group. This knowledge is used in conjunction with understanding about individual children's growth patterns, strengths, interests, and experiences to design the most appropriate learning environment. Although the content of the curriculum is determined by many factors such as tradition, the subject matter of the disciplines, social or cultural values, and parental desires, for the content and teaching strategies to be developmentally appropriate,they must be age appropriate and individually appropriate (Bredekamp, 1987).

SCREENING PROCESS

Procedures administered or obtained by the school districts to assess children's development prior to school entry. These procedures may include the use of screening instruments, the attainment of medical information and parent questionnaires, and the screening of vision, hearing, speech and motor development.

DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING TESTS

Assessment of children's abilities to acquire skills, not an assessment of the skills that children have acquired . Developmental screening tests should be used only as a first step in identifying children who may be in need of further assessment.

READINESS TESTS

Assessment of the skills that children have acquired so that teachers can plan appropriate instruction.

ACHIEVEMENT TESTS

Measurement of what children have learned or of the skills that have been acquired from instruction.

DIAGNOSTIC TESTS

Tests which are used to identify children who have special needs, to determine the nature of the problem, and to suggest remediation strategies.

INTELLIGENCE TESTS

Standardized tests which purport to measure children's intellectual capacities as compared to established age norms.

READINESS

Five dimensions of early learning and development that are essential to consider in addressing a child's development and readiness for school are:

- physical well-being and motor development
- social and emotional development
- approaches toward learning
- language usage
- cognition and general knowledge.

TRANSITION

Activities that support the principle of continuity for young children. Transitions may occur vertically, through various periods of children's lives, or horizontally, across children's families, schools and communities (Kagan, 1992).

DELAYED ENTRY

The practice of holding back from kindergarten entry a child who is age-eligible to enter school.

RETENTION

The practice of adding a year of schooling, either through repeating a grade or through placement in an extra-year program.

EXTRA YEAR PROGRAM

An additional year of schooling either prior to or following regular kindergarten, for children deemed to be "unready", "immature", or "young". Programs prior to kindergarten may be called *Transition*, *Junior Kindergarten* , *Developmental Kindergarten* or *Pre-Kindergarten.* Programs prior to first grade may be called *Transition*, *Readiness*, *Junior First Grade* or *Pre-First Grade*.

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READINESS

An Issue Paper Developed by the
Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council

CURRENT PRACTICE

Readiness, although a popular term, is not clearly conceptualized in most current educational practice. The application of readiness criteria and procedures makes a judgment about a child's overall behavioral and cognitive ability to adjust and adapt to age and grade expectations, as predetermined by the program being offered in the child's school. It does not acknowledge the intrinsic worth of each child's level of development.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

(Q) **What is the National Education Goals Panel and how does it define readiness?**

(A) In 1990, the President and 50 state governors established six optional education goals, the first of which is "*By the year 2000 all children will start school ready to learn,*" known as the "*Readiness*" Goal. The goal's objectives are concerned with children's early learning and development within the institutions of families, preschool programs, health care systems and schools. The objectives were developed to ensure that all children, including the disadvantaged and disabled, will have access to high quality programs; every parent will have available support being the child's first teacher; and children will receive the nutrition and health care needed in order to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies.

The National Education Goals Panel, charged with assessing and reporting the nation's and states' progress toward meeting the National Education Goals, appointed a Resource Group and at least one Technical Planning Group for each goal. The Goal I Technical Planning Group agreed that five dimensions of early learning and development are essential to consider when assessing a child's development and readiness for school:

- physical well-being and motor development
- social and emotional development
- approaches toward learning
- language usage
- cognition and general knowledge.

The definition is consistent with the "whole child" concept of development. Children are not "ready" or "unready" for school, but, in fact, display varying levels of skills and experience relevant to all of the developmental dimensions.

(Q) **Are we giving license to the regular kindergarten program to become more rigid and formal, by establishing readiness "norms," which keep children who are deemed immature out of programs?**

(A) Where readiness is used as a gatekeeping function which expects children to meet the demands of the school, strategies are devised by schools that essentially try to make children older. Some examples are establishing transitional classes, raising the age of school entry or holding children out of school. All of these so-called solutions only accelerate the demands on children who enter kindergarten and may experience more rigid and formal programs.

(Q) **Do we have access to research which investigates whether children who are deemed "not ready" do as well or better over time than children who enter when age eligible? Does postponing school entry for a year result in higher achievement in elementary school?**

(A) Research shows that it is the quality of the program in which the child participates, and the involvement of parents, rather than the chronological age of entry which determine later school success (Langer, Kalk and Sears, 1984). The outdated theory that readiness is mostly a function of time, and that growth is solely a function of maturity, denies the fact that adults play an active role in facilitating children's learning. The assumption that children who are "not ready" do not belong in school, and a system which labels a child as such, often influence the decision to keep the child out, based on traits such as social immaturity. In fact, social immaturity can be best ameliorated by a child's participation in school with a group of peers. Postponing school entry for a year appears to have little effect on the leveling off which occurs in third grade (Dietz and Wilson, 1985).

(Q) **How are readiness criteria determined? How valid and reliable are the testing instruments for the population being tested?**

(A) Many educators and legislators assume that tests exist to reliably determine which children are "ready" for school. Tests which are used to determine denial of entry to school or assignment to a special class must offer the highest assurance of reliability and validity. "No existing readiness measure meets these criteria" (Willer and Bredekamp, 1990).

(Q) **How does the emotional impact of "not ready" affect child and family? Does it become a self-fulfilling prophecy over the child's school career?**

(A) The persistence factor of a first experience of failure for both child and family before entering the educational system provides an unnecessary, negative impact that is rarely reversed (Shepard and Smith, 1990).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Empower parents to investigate the attitude, rationale, and related practices of their school system in judging young children entering school.

2. Make schools places where developmentally appropriate criteria are used to design programs for children. According to Bette Caldwell:
   Our aim has been to formulate criteria which are general enough to cover different types of settings, yet specific enough to be objectively observable, which are precise enough to convey the true meaning of each component, yet comprehensive enough to allow for individual variations. We have not attempted to impose a narrow stereotype of quality in early childhood programs. Rather, we have identified specific aspects of program realities which respect the diversity of educational philosophies without compromising what we know to be the developmental needs of young children Bredekamp, 1984).

3. Support policies which are accepting of children's differing experiences prior to kindergarten entry. Develop kindergarten programs which are responsive to these differences rather than reacting to these differences by providing differentiated programs for this population.

4. Adopt and act on the definition of readiness by the National Education Goals Panel's.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

1. Provide parents, teachers and administrators with concise materials related to Connecticut's children and how "readiness concepts" have affected school populations, retention, and programming in their schools.

2. Contrast test scores in two communities with varying entrance and transition structures.

3. Mount an awareness campaign, describing developmentally appropriate learning practices, publicly directed to the education of the community.

4. Determine how to ensure that students from differing racial, ethnic, and language backgrounds are provided an equal opportunity to enter kindergarten when they are age eligible.

5. Utilize the National Education Goals Panel's definition of readiness and ensure that assessments of the strengths and needs of children entering school reflect the five dimensions of readiness. Particular attention should be given to ensure that these dimensions are accurately identified in children from varying social and cultural contexts.

6. Adopt policies and practices which address children's well-being. Provide learning environments that are rich in opportunities to explore. "Preparing children for school means helping them become healthy, adjusted, curious and expressive, as well as knowledgeable" (Goal I Technical Planning Group, 1993, p.35).

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TRANSITION

An Issue Paper Developed by the
Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council

CURRENT PRACTICE

Although the vast majority of children who attend early childhood programs enter public schools, very few public schools have any system for learning about this prior experience or for smoothing the transition for children entering kindergarten (NASBE, 1988).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Q) **Why should schools be concerned about facilitating transition and ensuring continuity for children as they move from the home or early care and education programs to the elementary school?**

A) Transition is important, in part, because of the national emphasis upon early childhood development and school readiness. The first of the six National Education Goals states that "by the year 2000 all children will enter school ready to learn."

Learning is a continuous process. Therefore, the transition from home or early care and education programs to the elementary school is important for all those who influence children's lives. Kindergarten programs should build on the learning and development that occur in the home and through prior preschool experiences (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986).

Smooth transitions are essential to the educational adjustment and development of young children and to the well-being of their families. Abrupt shifts between preschool and kindergarten and between home and school are often stressful and can hamper children's educational progress.

Q) **What are benefits of ensuring smooth transitions for children and families?**

A) Many benefits result for children, families and early childhood educators through facilitating transition. Among the benefits listed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1986) are:

For Children:

- Enhanced self-esteem and confidence
- Improved peer-group relations
- Greater efficiency in learning
- Positive regard for teachers

For Parents:

- An understanding of phases of early childhood education
- Increased confidence in contacts with educational personnel
- A better background for being in partnership with schools
- Enhanced self-esteem
- More effective communication skills

For Teachers:

- Enhanced ability to meet individual needs of children
- Increased efficiency of program planning and implementation
- Better community support
- A wider pool of resources

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide early childhood programs that are developmentally appropriate. Elementary schools working in partnership with preschool programs within the community can foster a common philosophy of developmental appropriateness. It has been established that high-quality program experiences pave the way for children to be successful in school and in life (NASBE, 1988).

2. Involve parents in school programming and activities. The involvement of parents should continue when children enter the elementary school. Good schools for young children welcome family members in various ways. Parents can be involved as decision makers, volunteers, and staff. They can participate in parent education and support groups, be encouraged to observe the classroom, and, in general, take a more active role in their child's education both at school and at home (Lombardi, 1992).

3. Provide supportive services to families. Schools should provide a continuum of comprehensive, integrated services for children and their families.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

1. Establish local early childhood education councils. These councils build bridges between elementary schools and early childhood programs and provide a medium for establishing and nurturing the partnerships that will allow young children to be better served. (Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council, n.d.).

2. Develop transition plans with preschool community programs. These plans facilitate the exchange of information between families from preschool programs and the elementary school.

3. Develop training plans and utilize training opportunities that will increase school staff's awareness of how to foster partnerships with parents.

4. Establish linkages with community agencies, including health, mental health and social service agencies.

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KINDERGARTEN ENTRY AGE

An Issue Paper Developed by the
Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council

CURRENT PRACTICE

Some children are counseled out of kindergarten, delaying their school entry.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Q) Is there a disadvantage to being among the youngest in a grade?

A) In comparing younger with older students in a grade, achievement differences favoring the older students are usually found. However, the differences are small (7 or 8 percentile points) and disappear by about third grade (Shepard and Smith, 1986). Younger students have also been more likely to repeat a grade or to be referred for special education. This difference appears to be due to teachers' perceptions of the appropriate way to deal with individual differences, rather than greater incidence of disabilities or school failure. Preschool experiences in a high quality program, beginning at age 3, may counteract the negative effects of being younger (Gullo and Burton, 1992).

By Connecticut law, children who will be five years old on or before January 1 are eligible to enter school in September. School districts, therefore, must provide a program which will meet a wide range of individual developmental differences.

Q) **By admitting children to school on the basis of chronological age, aren't we ignoring the fact that children develop at different rates?**

A) Chronological age is the only unbiased criterion for school entry. All other standards such as readiness or achievement tests or developmental screenings, are subject to serious weaknesses in validity, reliability, cultural bias, and the young child's poor test taking ability (NAEYC, 1988 ; Bredekamp, 1987; NAECS/SDE, 1987).

Q) **Why not raise the school entry age in Connecticut by moving the cut-off date to September?**

A) Raising the school entry age threatens to produce even greater inequities in educational opportunities. While some children will spend their additional year before kindergarten in high quality preschool programs or nurturing homes, others will lose another year in unstimulating programs or home environments. Such differences in early experiences have a significant impact on the development of the skills and attitudes which children will bring to kindergarten (NAEYC, n.d.).

In addition, a later school entry age does nothing to meet the challenges of educating children with a wide range of development. Kindergartners would still represent a range of a full year chronologically, and even more than that developmentally. The problem of being among the youngest is a relative one. In comparison to older students in the group, younger children are at somewhat of a disadvantage in the early school years, regardless of their actual ages.Thus, with a September 1 cut-off date, the children with July or August birthdays are perceived similarly to those with a November or December birthday in a system with a January 1 cut-off date (Wolf and Kessler, 1987; Shepard, 1986).

Q) **How then can we respond to individual differences in development among kindergartners?**

A) The best means of addressing individual developmental differences is through the use of developmentally appropriate teaching and curriculum. Avoidance of escalating expectations for children and overemphasizing teacher-directed instruction are key to this concept. Teachers should be free to set goals appropriate to the group and individual needs, and to use varied techniques to help children reach these goals.

When looking at individual development, educators need to bear in mind that each child will have a unique profile. A developmental level is not a single quality or a composite that can be given a meaningful age equivalency. Instead, each child will have areas of relative strengths and weaknesses forming a constellation of developmental characteristics. In order to fit the program to the child, it is essential to know the child well and to have a clear view of his or her individual developmental profile.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All children should be welcomed into kindergarten when they are eligible by law.

2. Children should be systematically observed in order to determine their individual developmental accomplishments and needs.

3. Kindergarten programs should be marked by flexible approaches to meeting each child's individual needs within a heterogeneous grouping.

4. Kindergarten programs should be developmentally appropriate in all areas.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

1. Evaluate and modify the current kindergarten program, including expectations, curricula, and methodology, using the current *Guide to Program Development for Kindergarten Part II* (State of Connecticut Board of Education, 1988).

2. Form early childhood units within the elementary school for the purpose of developing a continuum from kindergarten through grade 2 that reflects developmentally appropriate practices (NASBE, 1988).

3. Evaluate and modify primary grade programs to insure the continuous progress of all children. Standards and suggested practices can be found in *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8* (Bredekamp, 1987).

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KINDERGARTEN ENTRY PROCEDURES

An Issue Paper Developed by the
Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council

CURRENT PRACTICE

Sometimes the first experience children and parents have with the public school is that of a test for kindergarten entry.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

(Q) **What do children and their parents need in order to facilitate the entry into the public school?**

(A) Children and parents may be feeling apprehensive, confused, or uninformed about the kindergarten program, the school, and/or how the child's specific strengths and weaknesses will be addressed. The primary need is for information and reassurance, in order to build trust in the school and confidence that the child will have a successful kindergarten year. Feelings about beginning kindergarten are often formed long before the first day of school.

The kindergarten entry process should be designed so that the following questions can be satisfactorily answered for children and parents:

- Is this school a friendly place?
- Will the people in the school have the expertise and willingness to get to know the child's strengths and needs?
- Are there interesting and enjoyable materials and activities for the child to experience with success?
- Will the staff and the other children like and accept the child?
- Will the parent's questions be answered in an open manner?
- Will the staff help the child and parents to understand school policies and procedures?
- Will the child be kept safe under the care of the staff?

(Q) **What does the school need in order to facilitate the entry of new kindergarteners into its program?**

(A) The school needs to obtain accurate, up-to-date information concerning the child's social, emotional, language, cognitive and motor development as soon as possible, in order to plan for meeting the child's needs in the kindergarten program. Because children's

development is often characterized by rapid spurts of growth, it is important that development be evaluated at the beginning of the kindergarten year, rather than in the preceding spring. The school can also benefit from a long-range perspective of the child's development over time, gathered from parents and preschool staffs.

The kindergarten entry process should be designed so that the following questions are answered for the school:

- What is the child's medical history? Are there any conditions or medications that may have an impact upon the child in school? Are the child's vision and hearing functioning well?
- What kinds of group and life experiences has the child had prior to kindergarten?
- Are there any family factors that are signifiicant? Is there any area of family need which the school can help to meet?
- Does the child have any areas of development that may require special attention?
- What modifications in the curriculum or program may be needed to help the child have a happy, successful kindergarten experience?
- Does the child or parent need any special help in making the initial adjustment to school?

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Concentrate upon making the intiation into the kindergarten and public school a positive experience for children and parents.

2. Do not make tests part of the orientation to kindergarten. If a developmental screening or other form of testing is to be done, it should be incorporated into the kindergarten day and program after the start of school.

3. Use staff who are sensitive to young children to administer any screening instruments or assessments, or to make classroom observations.

4. Strengthen communication with local preschool and child care providers about each other's programs and about individual children.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

1. Reach out to parents and children during the preschool years.

- Invite preschoolers to school programs or events.
- Give talks by school staff members at local preschools or the public library.
- Observe local preschools while the classes are in session. These observations can be made by teachers and principals.
- Administer developmental screenings to children during the preschool years (ages 3 and 4), rather than in conjunction with kindergarten entry.

2. Develop a comprehensive kindergarten entry process that includes procedures for the spring through the early fall.

Spring Activities:
- Arrange visits for children and their parents to visit kindergarten classrooms to become acquainted with the staff and the environment. This can be arranged in small groups during the school day, or in larger groups after school.
- Encourage parents to bring their children to play on the school playground during the summer.
- Obtain a developmental history from parents.
- Obtain information from preschools or from day care providers.

Late Summer Activities:
- Offer a school bus orientation program which introduces safety and school bus procedures. Include a short bus ride for children.
- Send a welcome letter to each child from the teacher.
- Host a "new parents" night to acquaint parents with the school building and basic school procedures.

First Day of School:
- Arrange for parents or other appointed adults to accompany their children to school and remain if needed by their children.
- Plan for children to attend in smaller groups for a shortened time in order to ease their transition to school.
- Provide refreshments and the opportunity for informal conversation for parents when they have left their child in the classroom.

Early Fall Activities:
- Record observations of children within the kindergarten classroom. Curriculum centers may be set up to focus on a particular area, such as large motor skills.
- Begin the assessment process for children whose developmental history, prior experiences, and/or current performance indicate possible areas of need.
- Establish a child study team, that includes staff from various areas, to assist in identifying needs and planning intervention strategies.
- Begin to provide direct services and/or classroom consultation to meet children's special needs.

- Provide parents with an overview of the goals and approaches of the kindergarten program. Consider creating a slide presentation to show to parents.
- Contact each parent to "touch base"concerning the child's adjustment to school, and to answer any questions.
- Take care to familiarize children with the school building and all school workers. Help them to learn names of staff and understand their roles.
- Issue a periodic kindergarten newsletter to build parent awareness of the experiences children are having in kindergarten.

DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING

An Issue Paper Developed by the
Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council

CURRENT PRACTICE

Developmental screening instruments are sometimes used for the wrong purposes or at the wrong time. For example, developmental screenings are often administered in conjunction with kindergarten entry. A developmental screening is sometimes misused to label children, to place children in special education programs, or to place children in programs other than regular kindergarten.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Q) **What is the purpose of a developmental screening?**

A) Developmental screenings are used to identify children in need of further assessment for special education services. Screenings must be followed up by individual diagnostic assessment before services are recommended. Children under 3 years are evaluated for eligibility and their needs are assessed through certified personnel in the Birth to Three system. Under federal and state law, children with special needs must be identified and serviced from birth (Public Act 93-383; CT General Statues 1076A-E; Public Law 102-119 Individuals with Disabilities and Education Act). Developmental screening helps schools to meet these obligations.

Q) **How valid and reliable are the results of a developmental screening?**

A) Young children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of testing. Surroundings, adults, and tasks that are unfamiliar to children may compromise the children's performances. In addition, very few screening instruments adequately satisfy criteria for reliability and validity that apply to psychological testing (Shepard, 1992; Bredekamp and Shepard, 1989; Meisels, 1989; Meisels and Provence, 1989; NAEYC, 1988). All developmental screening instruments to date demonstrate a decline in the accuracy of prediction beyond two years (Meisels, 1989). Locally developed screening tests are seldom valid, and are an unsatisfactory basis for identification of children.

(Q) **How do developmental screenings differ from other kinds of kindergarten entry tests?**

(A) Developmental screenings are designed to be a first step in identifying children in need of special services. They are limited instruments that only indicate that a child may require diagnostic assessment. Developmental screening tests usually include items related to the following areas: visual-motor/adaptive; language and cognition; gross motor/body awareness (Meisels, 1989).

Another category of test commonly used prior to kindergarten entry is that of readiness tests. Readiness tests are designed to provide information about individual strengths and weaknesses which teachers can use in planning instruction and meeting individual needs within the classroom. They focus on a child's current skill achievement and performance, rather than on developmental potential (Meisels, 1989). Readiness tests as a whole suffer the same weaknesses in validity and reliability as other standardized tests used with young children (NAEYC, 1988). Readiness tests do not predict future school success with enough accuracy to warrant their use as placement tools (Meisels, 1989).

Unfortunately, both developmental screenings and readiness tests are increasingly being used in inappropriate ways. Decisions about school entry, grade or group placement, or the labeling of children are misuses of developmental screenings and readiness tests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. School districts should conduct developmental screenings of children during the preschool years, using the most valid and reliable instruments, in order to determine the need for any further assessment.

2. When administered, developmental screenings, as well as any other testing, should be used solely for the purposes for which they were designed. Developmental screening instruments should only be used as a first step in identifying children who would benefit from intervention.

3. The assessment of young children should not rely solely upon standardized tests, including developmental screenings. More valuable sources are the information gained from careful observations by teachers and other professionals, along with information and insights from the child's family and previous teachers.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

1. In lieu of kindergarten entry testing, create a system for collecting information about incoming kindergartners from families and preschool settings. Such a system might include observational visits to preschools by elementary school staff, developmental history forms, home visits, and written narratives or checklists to be completed by preschool staff.

2. Cooperate with area pediatricians and preschools to identify children who should be screened and/or assessed for special needs.

3. Establish monthly "birthday parties" to which all children turning 3 years or 4 years are invited. Use the birthday party for informal observation of children's language, social, motor, and cognitive development.

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ACHIEVEMENT TESTING

An Issue Paper Developed by the
Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council

CURRENT PRACTICE

Young children's learning is frequently evaluated by using standardized, norm-referenced achievement tests. The results of such tests are used, sometimes in isolation, for a variety of purposes:

- making decisions regarding the child's placement in a grade, instructional level, special help or enrichment program
- evaluating the effectiveness of curricula or programs
- evaluating teachers
- comparing schools and districts
- satisfying demands for accountability of school districts and personnel to the public and its officials at all levels.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

(Q) **Should standardized achievement tests be used with young children?**

(A) The disadvantages and weaknesses of standardized achievement tests administered to young children usually far outweigh any potential benefits. The use of standardized achievement tests should be considered in light of the "utility criterion"--the test must be used to improve services for children and to ensure that children benefit from the school experiences (NASBE, 1988; NAEYC, 1988). For all other purposes, alternative means of gathering information about student progress should be utilized.

Concerns about the increased use of standardized achievement testing have been expressed by the following organizations:

Association for Childhood Education International
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
National Association for the Education of Young Children
National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Black Child Development Institute

In addition, some states have recognized the hazards of standardized achievement testing. North Carolina has banned testing through second grade. Arizona limits mandatory first grade testing to a sample of students. In 1989, Texas eliminated its minimal skills test from first grade and does not require a second grade test. Mississippi discontinued standardized testing of kindergartners in 1988. Also, in 1988, Georgia dropped a test used to determine promotion from kindergarten.

(Q) **Can we trust the results of standardized achievement tests?**

(A) The reliability of most popular standardized achievement tests is very high, meaning that the results for an individual or group will be quite consistent at two different testings. However, it is much more difficult to establish a test's validity--whether the test measures what it's supposed to. A test can have high reliability, yet not measure much of importance. Some reading tests, for example, have little to do with reading; some writing tests do not require the student to do any writing (Perrone, 1989). Doubts about the content validity of tests are deepened by issues of racial, cultural, or socioeconomic bias. While standardized achievement tests have a scientific aura about them, in fact, they are flawed tools at best (Kamii, 1990; Perrone, 1979; Perrone, 1990).

When standardized achievement tests are administered to young children, their trustworthiness is even more suspect, given the nature of the test-taker. Young children are less able than older students to transcend the concerns of the moment in order to "do their best" on a test. Unfamiliarity with the test situation and tasks, physical discomfort, lack of interest, and inexperience are some of the factors that make young children poor test-takers (NAEYC, 1988).

(Q) **What are the negative consequences of standardized achievement testing of children through the primary grades?**

(A) Many of the problems with standardized achievement testing exist at any level, not just when young children are involved. An area of negative impact felt at many levels is the pressure testing places upon administrators and/or teachers. Evaluations, salaries and even jobs are sometimes tied to students' scores on standardized tests. When tests are given this much weight, they begin to drive the curriculum (Brandt, 1989). At the least, valuable teaching-learning time is lost to covering test-taking skills and the test content. Higher order thinking skills, creativity, and positive attitudes about learning, all of which are not part of the testing, are pushed aside for the sake of the test scores. Rather than setting forth goals for an appropriate, in-depth curriculum and seeking the means of assessing whether students achieve those goals, the focus is on molding the curriculum to fit the test (Meisels, 1989; Shepard, 1989). The norms established for tests

are often surpassed once the test is published, due to the phenomenon of teaching to the test. By 1987, the average test scores for elementary achievement tests of all 50 states were found to be above the national average (Cannell, 1987).

The use of standardized achievement tests is closely related to other inappropriate practices. Drill exercises, worksheets, ability grouping, retention, and readiness testing commonly coexist with achievement tests. Standardized achievement tests are sometimes used as "gates"/promotion to the next grade or as justification for segregated groupings (Cohen, 1990; NAECS/SDE, 1988; NAEYC, 1987).

Standardized achievement testing has a negative effect upon efforts to provide young children with developmentally appropriate programs. Early childhood educators have difficulty providing the kind of experiential, exploratory, child-centered program that is best for young children when standardized tests are used to measure children's achievement (Livingston, Castle & Nations, 1989; NAEYC 1987). Many of the goals of a sound early childhood program, which include all aspects of cognitive and social-emotional competence, cannot be measured with standardized tests. These tests do not reflect developmental theory and practice (Cohen, 1990). The learning derived from the "best practices" in disciplines such as mathematics, science, and language arts, cannot be measured by the test construction and content of standardized achievement tests (Leinwand, 1990; Harman, 1990; Hiebert & Calfee, 1990).

Of serious concern, too, is the labeling of children based on the test scores. Placement in lower level groups is often related to test results. Children are viewed, and begin to view themselves, as failures because of test scores. Thus, the test begins or feeds into a cycle of poor self-image and poor success. Such labeling affects a disproportionate number of children from lower socioeconomic populations (Perrone, 1976). The test results are seldom followed up with services to enhance the child's educational experience.

(Q) **If we don't use standardized achievement tests with young children, how can we be sure they are learning?**

(A) Assessment practices for young children should reflect the developmental principles of the curriculum. Observing and recording children's developmental progress, collecting samples of children's products, and taping children's reading can be done informally and regularly. This information should then be used to modify the curriculum and plan activities to meet children's needs, and to provide feedback to parents (NAEYC, 1987; NASBE, 1988). Most educators and parents know that standardized tests are not an accurate measure of children's development. Teachers trained in observing

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and assessing children can provide richer, more accurate information about their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop new approaches to documenting and reporting the development of young children.

2. Use the results of assessments to help in planning more effective ways of helping children learn.

3. Review the standardized tests that are being used to determine if they are free from bias, reliable, valid and sensitive to the developmental needs of young children.

4. Guard against the proliferation of redundant testing.

5. Review the needs for and the purposes of all testing, in addition to the coordination of all tests administered.

6. Do not base important decisions about a child solely on a standardized test score.

7. Extend the standard of developmentally appropriate practice to assessment practices. Evaluations of learning should fit the philosophy and goals of the early childhood programs.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

1. Provide training to administrators and teachers on the understanding and evaluation of standardized tests, and of alternate methods of assessment.

2. Include training in a variety of ways to assess children, including observing and recording children's development, in teacher preparation programs and professional development.

3. Express concerns about local, state, or federally-mandated testing to the appropriate educational authorities.

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RETENTION

An Issue Paper Developed by the
Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council

CURRENT PRACTICE

Program expectations are frequently escalated or inappropriately raised. Thus, retention experiences for children are increasing, because in many instances some children are thought to be "not ready" for the next grade.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

(Q) **What are the benefits or ill effects of retention or extra year programs upon young children?**

(A) Retention can be in the form of a year of schooling for kindergarten-eligible children prior to kindergarten, a year of repeated kindergarten, or a level of schooling between kindergarten and first grade. The retention solution is based on the assumption that early retention does not have the same negative effect as later retention and that holding a child back early will help him or her to achieve more later, with less stress. Retention decisions may be based on standardized achievement tests results, primarily, or on immature behavior characteristics. However, there are almost no benefits to children who are retained. Since retained children are typically compared with the children in the grade level being repeated, rather than with those who were advanced to the next level, the comparison always justifies the retention decision. In an attempt to protect children from inappropriate kindergarten/primary grade curricula, retention may be recommended.

Children who are retained may do poorly on measures of social adjustment, attitudes toward school, behavioral outcomes and attendance. Repeating a grade often reduces achievement levels and increases likelihood of school dropout rates in subsequent years (Shepard and Smith, 1990). Retained children frequently recognize that they are not making normal progress. Even when parents and teachers have positive perceptions about retained children having fewer struggles, it is represented throughout the retention literature that the emotional and social effects of retention on children are usually negative. The number of years required to remain in school until graduation increases and the burden to a school district for funding an extra year of school also increases.

The National Association of School Psychologists (1988), in its statement on student grade retention, asserts that "the retention of children, while widely practiced, is not in large measure substantiated by sound research." Cumulative evidence indicates that retention decisions cannot be validated by standardized or competency-based tests and that retention can negatively affect achievement and social/emotional adjustment.

(Q) **Should retention be used to help reduce the range of abilities with which teachers must cope?**

(A) When less able or "immature" children are removed from their regular classrooms and peers, license is given to further increase the academic demands of the regular curriculum (Bredekamp and Shepard, 1989). However, increased academic demands also hurt those who can handle them (stress-related symptoms, fear of failure and school avoidance behaviors), as well as those who fail. By teaching a mixed ability group of children, diversity becomes a plus for both more and less advanced children when teachers encourage peer tutoring and cooperative learning.

(Q) **How can the diverse needs of children in the same group be met through the curriculum and the program?**

(A) Emphasis needs to be given to the understanding of content and the meaningfulness of experiences in which children are engaged. For instance, emphasize an understanding of mathematical concepts embedded in symbols, computation, mathematical problem solving, and provide frequent opportunities to apply mathematical ideas and skills to real life solutions. Emphasize the meaning of what is being read and use a full range of cues to assist children in "constructing meaning" through a wide range of appropriate texts. Children's literature, language experience stories and reading material that reflect the life experiences and backgrounds of the children should be included. De-emphasize the teaching of discrete decoding skills. Emphasize meaningful written communication and process writing which draw upon children's experiences and knowledge. There should be less emphasis on the mechanics of written language in isolation from the act of communicating. There are more successful outcomes for all children when they are exposed to curricula which are inspiring and engaging. Children should be involved in solving meaningful problems within the context of real situations (Knapp and Shields, 1990).

Where there is balance between teacher initiated direction and child initiated learning, teachers :

- provide many opportunities for teacher-child and child-child discussion about ideas and their applications, or about the meaning of what children read and write
- integrate learning experiences
- model, demonstrate or explain strategies which enable children to monitor their own comprehension, tackle unfamiliar problems or carry out extended tasks independently
- set up supplemental instructional arrangements that are flexible and integrated with regular classroom activities for children who need extra help
- provide for project based activities which foster learning in heterogeneous groupings (Knapp and Shields, 1990).

(Q) **What alternatives to retention should the school provide?**

(A) When an increasing number of children are "failing" and are being retained at or between grade levels, the problem may be that the system is failing the children. The system should be changed to one in which programs and services are adapted in every possible way to meet each child's needs. School districts should adopt policies for ensuring that all students succeed.

Such alternatives might include:

- a belief that children can learn and will learn if programs are appropriate
- small class size
- changes in curricula
- multigrade classrooms which decrease grade isolation and allow students to move at their own pace
- the provision of instructional assistants
- less independent seat work and more peer tutoring
- less homework and more in-class assistance
- less testing and more explanation
- different methods of grouping
- extended or full-day kindergarten programs
- Saturday enrichment classes
- specifically designed summer classes that are highly motivating to children

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Children should be given every opportunity to succeed in their kindergarten classrooms where individual differences are expected and respected, and where there is a belief that the classroom environment can have a supportive effect on every child's growth and development.

2. Children should be offered flexible programs based on their individual needs, interests and abilities. Flexible promotion standards should be adopted that do not lock children into meeting strict and often unrealistic requirements, in order to progress to the next level.

3. Opportunities should be created for children to benefit from rich school experiences before formal assessment is incorporated into their programs.

4. Provisions should be made for parent support, education, and involvement.

5. Necessary support services by speech and language therapists, psychologists, social workers and curriculum coordinators should be provided.

6. Kindergarten/primary classrooms should be staffed with teachers who have strong backgrounds in child development and early childhood education.

7. Schools for young children should be administered by principals who understand and support appropriate educational practices.

8. Evaluation of children's growth, develpment and learning should be conducted over a long period of time. Retention, based only on short term evaluations, does not always allow for the effects of positive growth to emerge before grade retention is recommended.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

1. Assess kindergarten/primary classroom practices using *The Teacher's On-Going Role in Creating a Developmentally Appropriate Early Childhood Program: A Self-Study Process For Teachers of Children Ages 5-8* (State of Connecticut Board of Education, 1990).

2. Adopt NAEYC's (1987) guidelines in *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* and the State of Connecticut Board of Education's 1988 *Guide to Program Development for Kindergarten Part I* in developing or revising kindergarten/primary programs that more closely match the needs of children and reduce the need for retention.

3. Build a continuum of developmentally appropriate practices throughout the primary grades so that flexible programs and teachers will allow for promotion rather than retention.

4. Encourage the use of interventions other than retention for children in academic difficulty.

5. Promote and publicize research comparing retention to alternative intervention practices at the kindergarten and first grade levels with children determined to be at risk for school failure.

6. Promote and utilize available records and observational data such as:

   - the child's school and developmental history;
   - possible reasons for school failure (e.g., emotional problems, health problems, frequent school moves or absences);
   - the effectiveness of instruction (e.g., teaching practices, the match between teaching and learning styles and between student success level and curricular demands).

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EXTRA YEAR PROGRAMS

An Issue Paper Developed by the
Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council

CURRENT PRACTICE

To add a school year to a child's education when the child has been deemed to be unready for the next level of education.

There are multiple reasons cited to justify the decision to add an extra year of schooling:

- Social immaturity
- Short attention span
- High activity level (hyperactive)
- Need for more time for academic preparation for the next level of instruction
- Parental preference
- Cultural or language difference

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Q) **How is the decision made concerning the child's placement in an extra year program?**

A) Too often the decision to place the child in an extra program relies upon a single source, such as the teacher's judgment, parental opinion, or testing. None of these sources alone has sufficient reliability and validity to support such a decision. Even the most insightful observations of a child give only a snapshot of the child's current development. It cannot be known fully what a child will be like in six months or a year, given the nature of human development. In addition, the placement decision frequently reflects the notion that the child should "get ready" for the program, rather than modifying the regular program to support the child's continuing development.

Q) **How valid and reliable are the testing instruments sometimes used to make the placement decision?**

A) Many of the current testing instruments are invalid and unreliable and are often misused. As an example of misuse, screening instruments are often used to make placement decisions. According to Miesels

and Provence (1989), "No process, procedure or assessment device should ever be used for any purpose for which it was not designed."

Q) **What is an appropriate program for 4-8 year olds?**

A) A developmentally appropriate curriculum provides a sound base for programs for young children. Guidelines for appropriate programming can be found in *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs for Children from Birth through Age 8.* (NAEYC, 1987) and *A Guide to Program Development for Kindergarten* (Connecticut State Board of Education, 1988).

Current literature implies that schools should meet the developmental needs of all children, rather than trying to make children fit the school's profile of expectations. Many factors such as learning style, temperament, language, cultural background and family structure contribute to individual differences among children. These differences will not be ameliorated by an extra year program (Bredekamp, 1987, 1990; Charlesworth, 1989; Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989).

Q) **What does the extra year provide?**

A) It is doubtful that an extra year provides any benefits that contribute to a child's later school success. Typically, no lasting benefits from the extra year are found when student progress is evaluated long-term (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989; Gredler, 1984; May and Welch, 1984). Although many parents and educators will cite anecdotal evidence of a child who thrived after an extra year, in truth, there is no way of knowing how the child would have progressed without an extra year.

In addition, extra year programs increase the costs of educating a student by 8 percent. It is estimated that retention cost nearly $10 billion, nationally, in 1986 (Center for Policy Research in Education, n.d.). With many demands pulling at scarce financial resources, it is questionable whether these funds are best used to support extra year programs. Education initiatives such as the provision of classroom aides, after school programs, individualized educational plans, and successful, innovative curriculum models have a much better record of improving student success in school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Schools should provide developmentally appropriate programs for young children with accommodations made for a child's continuous growth.

2. Extra years should not be promulgated except for rare and compelling reasons.

3. Only reliable and valid instruments should be used to assess children.

4. Multidimensional assessment is needed for an accurate profile of individual children and should include a teacher's observations.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

1. Plan for an early childhood curriculum that is a continuum for the child, rather than a segmented grade level set of expectations.

2. Implement developmentally appropriate curricula for pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and the primary grades.

3. Provide educators with support and assistance on developmental issues through staff development.

4. Support the provision of smaller classes and provide extra help for children within the classroom.

5. Gradually replace extra year programs with alternatives that address children's needs.

6 Involve the whole school community, parents, teachers and administrators, in the change process.

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